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MODERN AMERICAN WRITERS

EDITH WHARTON

MODERN AMERICAN
WRITERS

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E. Wharton

EDITH WHARTON

By
ROBERT MORSS LOVETT

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
NEW YORK :: :: :: :: :: :: 1925

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*Printed in the United
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P u b l i s h e d 1 9 2 5

EDITH WHARTON

THE decade of the 1890's in England has a definitely marked character. It was the period of reaction against Victorian seriousness, when Matthew Arnold was giving place to Walter Pater, and George Eliot to Oscar Wilde, and John Ruskin to Bernard Shaw; the period of the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*, of Max Beerbohm and Aubrey Beardsley; when realism in its tardy triumph was already touched by mysticism and Ibsen was succeeded by Maeterlinck; when the older school of fiction represented by Meredith and Hardy was passing, and Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, and *The Way of All Flesh* were just around the corner of the new century, and only Henry James among novelists of rank was destined to carry on.

It is characteristic of America, in its remoteness from the centre of Anglo-Saxon, and greater remoteness from European, influence, to lag behind such developments. On this side of the Atlantic the decade bears the

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marks of a belated Victorianism. The influence of Matthew Arnold was strong, and his doctrine of culture was being translated into literal terms. It was a period of expansion of education, through the development of graduate studies in the older colleges, the founding of new institutions and the re-creation of the state universities; and its further diffusion through university extension, women's clubs, and chautauquas. Contemporary with this intellectual self-consciousness went an increasing social self-consciousness. The industrial conflict showed itself in the strikes of the steel workers at Homestead and the railroad workers. The division between classes became sharper. In 1896 the Free Silver issue furnished an opportunity for a more radical shift in the political centre of gravity of the country than had taken place since the election of Jackson, and the narrowness of the escape emphasized the solidarity of the ruling class. The identification of this class with what was coming to be called big business was the chief political factor between the election of McKinley and the Great War, in which event it found its clearest exemplification. In literature there were notes of the decadence, it is true, but the chief development was that

of local realism marked by Mrs. Freeman and Miss Jewett in New England, by Hamlin Garland, Henry B. Fuller and Robert Herrick in the Middle West, and by Frank Norris on the Pacific Coast. American realism was not continental naturalism. The Puritan inheritance of morality and the new spirit of culture combined to insist upon the claims of significance of subject matter (a significance which is necessarily in the large sense moral) and of beauty of form, as opposed to the requirement of sheer fidelity to the objective world. Into this America of the 1890's came Edith Wharton, and in it she has steadily remained. The most superficial reading of her work brings evidence of her absorption in the somewhat mechanical operations of culture, her preoccupation with the upper class, and her loyalty to the theory of the art of fiction set forth by Henry James, of which the basis was a recognition of moral values. If one were to equip himself with a set of pigeon holes in which to collect the results of an analysis of Edith Wharton's work, they would be labelled: Culture, Class, Morality.

I

EDITH WHARTON was born in New York in 1862. Her parents were George Frederic and Lucretia Stevens Jones, the latter born Rhinelander. As a child she doubtless heard the drums and saw the banners that led the New York regiments to the front. Her great-grandfather, Ebenezer Stevens, was a general in the Revolutionary War. She was thus born, as it were, into some sort of historical consciousness. Her childhood must have made her familiar with those red brick houses on Washington Square and University Place whose interiors she recalled so minutely in *The Age of Innocence*. She must have been taken, perhaps in one of Brown's coupes, to the Academy of Music to hear Christine Nilsson sing *Faust*, or to Wallack's to see Dion Boucicault play *The Shaughraun*, or to Grace Church to witness the solemnization of a matrimonial alliance between the houses of van der Luyden, Dagonet, Lanning, or Mingott, as described in the same novel. Much of her childhood was passed abroad where her education by private

tutors gave her a very thorough knowledge of French, German, and Italian, and acquaintance with the literature and art of Europe since the Renaissance. Moreover, these early years began that experience of European life which became so large an element in the material and point of view of her later work. No American writer, not even Henry James, has had so complete an initiation into the civilization of Europe, past and present. In 1885 she married Edward Wharton. Although Mr. Wharton was a Bostonian she never seems to have known Boston well, or perhaps she recognized that it naturally belonged to Henry James. She continued to live in New York with summers in Newport and Lenox, an occasional excursion to the more primitive regions of New England, and frequent journeys to Europe. Since 1906 she has made her chief residence in Paris.

This European residence, intermittent at first and finally permanent, furnished opportunity for associations which became important influences on her career in literature. One of these was with Paul Bourget to whom she dedicated *The Valley of Decision*; another was with Henry James. In 1902 Mrs. Cadwalader Jones sent her sister-in-law's early

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collections of stories to Henry James, and received the gently condescending reply: "I take to her very kindly as regards her diabolical little cleverness, the quantity of intention and intelligence in her style, and her sharp eye for an interesting kind of subject. They [the stories] have made me want to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her." This promising introduction was the beginning of one of those friendships which are of real significance in literature. In 1905 James visited the Whartons at Lenox. In 1907 he was with them on their trip by motor through western and southern France. In 1908 he chaperoned Mrs. Wharton's literary pilgrimage to London, and writes of her as "spending several weeks in England for almost the first time ever and having immense success." There is no doubt that Mrs. Wharton regarded Henry James as the chief master of English fiction and that he in turn considered her his most proficient follower. She recalls this didactic attitude in her account of Henry James in his *Letters* (Quarterly, July, 1920) by quoting his reply to another and less apt pupil, Mrs. Humphry Ward, with a certain pity for the latter's incapacity to learn her lesson

or even understand it. It is certainly to be regretted that the influences under which Mrs. Wharton wrote were so remote from the material of life which was her inheritance. On the other hand it is to be said that she never renounced this birthright. More than once through her characters she bears testimony to the joy of coming back to the homely intimate things and people of her native land—that is to say, of New York. New York is Mrs. Wharton's own, by inheritance and association and affection. It is her home ground as Hampshire and Wiltshire are Miss Austen's, or Warwickshire and Derbyshire, George Eliot's. The only other city which plays a large and consecutive part in her stories is Paris, and her Paris is that of the foreigner.

II

IT is not necessary to explain Edith Wharton's addiction to literature. With her preoccupation with art and artists it was inevitable that she should seek expression in the forms practised in her own generation. Her first publication, so far as I have been able to discover, was a sonnet, *Happiness*, in Scribner's Magazine for December, 1889. This was followed by two others, *On Botticelli's Madonna in the Louvre* and *The Tomb of Ilaria* in the same magazine for January and February, 1891. It is noteworthy that of these first ventures one dealt with a question of life and the other two with artistic appreciation, and that all three are in the prescribed form of the sonnet. Her first story appeared in Scribner's for July, 1891, a very simple narrative of humble city life called *Mrs. Mans-
tey's View*. In December, 1893, appeared a second story, not, I believe, republished, *The Fulness of Life*. A woman who has just died is accosted on the threshold of eternity by the

Spirit of Life to whom she confesses that her life with her husband has been external and unsatisfactory. "His boots creaked and he always slammed the door when he went out, and he never read anything but railway novels and the sporting advertisements in the paper—and—in short we never understood each other." Her experience of the fulness of life has come to her through "the perfume of a flower or a verse of Dante or Shakespeare," and once especially through the spectacle of the tabernacle of Orcagna in the church of Or San Michele in Florence at Easter. Yet when the Spirit offers her the choice between eternity with a real soul-mate or with her husband, she decides to wait at the threshold for the latter's coming. Here we find several of the elements characteristic of Mrs. Wharton's later work—a moral problem, the appreciation of life through art, the symbolism of the supernatural—and a thread of irony running through it all. A third tale, *That Good May Come*, in Scribner's for May, 1894, presents the case of a poet who to meet family exigencies sells a scurrilous bit of verse on a scandal in private life—a case of æsthetic morality familiar enough in her later stories. Then came *The Pelican*, *The Muse's Tragedy*, and

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the others which were collected under the title, *The Great Inclination*, in 1899.

As one turns the pages of this ancient volume and catches the pale lineaments of the persons so distinguishingly named and so deftly characterized, who fence with each other with such dextrous play of speech and are so earnestly intent on the deeper implications of their association, one has a sense of the past such as comes from the illustrations in a mid-century volume of Harper's Magazine or The Cornhill. But to contemporary readers and critics this first gathering of Mrs. Wharton's genius was impressive enough. The likeness of her tales to those of her master was apparent, but Henry James had become a foreigner, an exotic. It was a matter of national pride that such rare flowers could grow on American soil. It is true there was present a disconcerting irony which it was easy to label cynicism, but on the whole it was recognized that Mrs. Wharton made for a sound view of society and morality. She was on the side of the angels. Miss Aline Gorren in *The Critic* credited Mrs. Wharton with transplanting the New England conscience to New York and giving it a home in the socially splendid exteriors of the best people.

“Mrs. Wharton finds an American soul outside of New England. Every thinking American must be grateful for this and he must recognize it as an achievement. . . . Mrs. Wharton takes the view that there *can* be something inside even when one spends one’s summers at Newport.”

In two of the stories of *The Greater Inclination* Mrs. Wharton deals with problems of æsthetic morality, the claim of life against that of art, and introduces two properties, which are of frequent recurrence—the letters of the *Muse’s Tragedy* and the portrait which gives the title to the last story. The theme of “literary remains” is given fuller treatment in the first of the novelettes (a form in which she followed Henry James), *The Touchstone* (1900). In 1901 the accumulated product of magazine success found publication in *Crucial Instances*, followed by *Sanctuary* (1903), another short story raised to the dimensions of a novelette. In 1904 appeared Mrs. Wharton’s third collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*, which shows this phase of her art at its best. She had learned how to take her moral instances more lightly and impartially, and her narrative moves more easily, without the emphasis of epigram. *The Other Two* is a beautifully simple statement

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of a situation in which a fastidious husband finds himself the host to his two matrimonial predecessors. Here, however, Mrs. Wharton's reserve in not obtruding correct views about divorce aroused the suspicion of the watchers and warders among her critics. Her irony also was beginning to be disquieting. The moralists were becoming jealous of her art; and instead of being praised for introducing the New England conscience into New York, she found herself reprobated for her Laodiceanism. To this feeling *The Independent* gave trenchant utterance (June 9, 1904). *The Descent of Man* is the story of Professor Linyard, who, intent on producing a satire on popular science in his book, *The Vital Thing*, unexpectedly finds himself a prophet and a best seller—and persists in his meretricious course. Now for *The Independent*:

“His ‘descent’ consists in this small caper. But as he does not recognize any God, and his original morality consisted merely in a scholarly devotion to a standard of professional ethics, his descent is vulgar rather than tragic. ‘The Quicksand’ is another geometrically accurate demonstration of the same idea from a different point of view. And the reader receives the impression that Mrs. Wharton has made a literary art of casuistry. Her charac-

ters have conscientious scruples that rarely deal with the real issues of life. And none of them have the will power to live up to their lights. Moral defeat is the sum total of every situation portrayed in this book. And no one except perhaps Mr. Henry James can present a revolting scene with more social delicacy. In the story 'The Other Two' the heroine has three husbands, all so closely connected in business or otherwise that upon a certain occasion she serves tea to them around her own parlor fire. The very ease with which the incident passes is offensive; and the woman's tact suggests that she is like an old shoe, worn by so many that she has become disgustingly adjustable to all. But from first to last the elegance and delicacy of the language employed conceal the leprous truth as effectively as some decorative conversations with the license meant by the speakers. And nowhere, either in ideas of virtue or vice, does she come into contact with normal life."

By 1904 Mrs. Wharton had served her apprenticeship in the short story. Two more harvestings of magazine planting, *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* (1908), and *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910) added nothing distinctive to her art except, in *The Eyes* and *Afterward*, of the latter volume, a power of dealing with moral issues through the symbolism of the supernatural, of which genre Henry James had given her a model in *The Turn of the Screw*. Another collection,

Xingu (1916), traverses in the main old paths with a lighter tread. The title story is a satire on the spurious culture of her countrymen, as exuberant as *The Pelican*, but without the use of the long arm of coincidence, and more humorously incisive.

It is characteristic of Mrs. Wharton's artistic enterprise that she should have exercised her literary talent in various fields. Her interest in the phase of culture which concerns materials and craftsmanship took form in *The Decoration of Houses*, written in collaboration with Ogden Codman in 1901. Three years later appeared *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, in which she supplied the letter press for Mr. Maxfield Parrish's illustrations.

In 1905 she gathered together a group of magazine articles on Italy into *Italian Backgrounds*, and in 1908 she published *A Motor Flight Through France*, which had appeared in installments in *The Atlantic* (December, 1906, to February, 1907). These books, in contrast, show the difference of her feeling toward her two foster countries. *Italian Backgrounds* is full of admirable pictures of landscape and a connoisseur's appreciation of art. It is clear, indeed, that Italy to her meant art. She perceived Italy through the eyes of

artists, or at least their record was in her memory to strengthen or define her own impressions. The habit of description by reference to canvas is insistent. "One expected at each turn to come upon some pastoral of Giorgione's or on one of Bonifazio's sumptuous picnics." "No one who has not looked on such a prospect in the early light of an August morning can appreciate the poetic truth of Claude's interpretation of nature: we seemed to be moving through a gallery hung with his pictures." She speaks of a "wild Salvator Rosa landscape"; and Turner's Road to Orvieto is in her mind as she approaches that enthroned city. In her description of France she shows rather a feeling for the life of the country as it expressed itself in cathedral and château, in bustling village and lonely dwelling, in the soil itself, so long the kindly mother of its people and object of their care. Italy was the country of her mind; France of her heart.

III

THE production of a masterpiece in the historical field has been a convention of English novelists since Scott. Thus Dickens wrote *The Tale of Two Cities*, Thackeray, *Henry Esmond*, George Eliot, *Romola*, Charles Reade, *The Cloister and the Hearth*. It is perhaps a measure of Edith Wharton's ambition that for her first work of long breath she should have undertaken a historical novel, choosing for her period the Italy of the eighteenth century. *The Valley of Decision* (the title Mrs. Wharton found in Joel III, 14) is the story of Odo Valsecca of a noble Italian house who shares in all the intellectual and political aspirations of the time. His love of Fulvia Vivaldi is frustrated for a time by his accession to the ducal throne of Pianura, and a marriage of state, but she eventually returns to him, to die in a popular uprising by a bullet destined for Odo. The plot, however, is secondary to the background, which Mrs. Wharton worked up with immense diligence and scholarly enthusiasm, to produce a

picture of the Italy of Alfieri as faithfully documented as George Eliot's study of the Florence of Savonarola. But *The Valley of Decision* surpasses *Romola*, as it does *La Chartreuse de Parme* and *Marius the Epicurean* with which it has certain affinities, in the plenitude of its detail. As the long pageant passes before us we recognize the figures and most of the properties which we remember from Goldoni or Casanova or the genre painters of Venice. There are the gentleman in powdered wig and his lady in mask and domino, accompanied by her *cicisbeo*, the little abbé sidling discreetly past, the nun who, dressed as a cavalier, will meet him at the foot of the statue of Colleoni, Columbine and Harlequin, the friar, the lawyer and the peasant; there are coaches, chairs, cards, masquerades, pet monkeys, apartments decorated with baroque stucco work, and terraced gardens with paths leading to statues and box trees cut into fantastic shapes. All that is lacking is that touch of poetic imagination which vivifies and animates.

The Valley of Decision was received very respectfully by the critics, and sold its way into a fairly popular success, but the flowering of Mrs. Wharton's reputation came in

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The House of Mirth, for the title of which she again searched the Scriptures and found it in Ecclesiastes VII, 4, "The heart of fools is in the house of mirth." The story ran in Scribner's Magazine from January to November, 1905, with increasing enthusiasm on the part of its readers, and on publication in book form became a best seller. For once Mrs. Wharton gave the public exactly what it wanted—a mixture of scandal, romance and melodrama, an exposure of the vices of metropolitan society through the experience of a girl who pathetically fails in her successive efforts to exploit that society or to lift herself out of it. Lily Bart is a name which lives in American literature among people by whom *The House of Mirth* has been forgotten. She is a typical, and through the glamour of her charm, almost a tragic figure. It is true, her creator's hand, as everyman's, is against her, and the scales of her fate are almost as heavily weighted as those of Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Heredity and environment play a large part in her undoing: her mother had eaten sour grapes and the daughter's teeth are set on edge. Nevertheless, at the root of her case is a moral attitude which is fundamentally wrong, and Lily is real enough to suggest that

she could have changed it, as the reader would doubtless have done in her place.

In the cordial reception of *The House of Mirth* critics and populace united. Mr. Henry Dwight Sedgwick, writing in *The Atlantic* (August, 1906), recalls that "on reading *The House of Mirth* the first sensation of everybody . . . was that of exultation, as they recognized all Mrs. Wharton's talents, but better and brighter." But along with an extravagant appreciation of her art, there went the growing dissatisfaction with her lack of categorical morality, a position voiced by *The Outlook*, which said of *The House of Mirth* (November 25, 1905):

"It rises at once and with the effortless power of a true work of art into the region of clear instinct, open-minded intelligence, and dramatic feeling, in which novels of the first order are conceived and fashioned. It justifies itself as a piece of expert workmanship. It would be difficult to find a carelessly written sentence, an obscure phrase, a halting paragraph, in the text of the book. There are passages which might be omitted without loss to the dramatic completeness of the story, but the passages which could be condensed are few. The thoroughness of structure which binds the chapters by the logic of life not less firmly than by the order of events is sustained by a selective power in the use

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of words which suggests Flaubert's method without conveying any sense of labor. . . . It is possible the dramatic effect of the novel might have been heightened if a few men and women of a different and finer type had been introduced; for every one in the story is vulgar, heartless, uninteresting, or immoral. It is impossible to emphasize the physical side of life, cut off religious influences, break away from religious habits, give up the reading of books, make sport an occupation instead of a recreation, without fertilizing the soil out of which all manner of silliness, inanity, vulgarity, and immorality grow. The young woman, whatever her training and standing, who drinks cocktails, smokes, plays cards for money, and indulges in an occasional oath, may not go to the bad, but she cannot escape becoming coarse and vulgar."

The grandiose success of *The House of Mirth* attracted attention abroad. Mme. Blanc, over the signature Th. Bentzon, contributed a long review of it to the *Revue de Deux Mondes* (November 1, 1906), "Le Monde ou l'on s'amuse aux Etats-Unis," in which she pronounces it the best novel in English of the year. *Madame de Treymes*, which appeared in Scribner's for August, 1906, and which Mme. Blanc doubtless read after she had written her exhaustive analysis and summary of *The House of Mirth*, apparently aroused in the critic the disquieting thought

that she might be the dupe of Mrs. Wharton's adroitness. This novelette, like Henry James's novel *The American*, deals with the conflict between two schools of honor and loyalty, those of robust America and decadent France. Madame de Treymes offers to John Durham her unlimited influence with her family to secure divorce with the possession of her son for her American sister-in-law, whom he loves with a fully returned affection, on condition that he pay the gambling debts of a certain Prince. Of course Durham refuses. But how comes Madame de Treymes to make such a confidence? Mme. Blanc shakes her wise French head over Mrs. Wharton's *a priori* psychology.

"If one is astonished that a well-born woman gives up the most intimate and most shameful secret of her heart to a stranger, almost a first-comer, the author answers with assurance: No Anglo-Saxon can understand the complete abandon of self-revelation which centuries of the confessional have given the Latin races. One might pick out easily more than one remark of similar justness; so we ask ourselves after having read with the liveliest interest *Madame de Treymes*, if *The House of Mirth* really exists at New York, or if it has issued like our Faubourg Saint-Germain, from the fertile imagination of Mrs. Edith Wharton."

The success of *The House of Mirth* gave Mrs. Wharton into the hands of her publishers, and her new novel, *The Fruit of the Tree*, was the *pièce de résistance* of Scribner's Magazine for 1907. As if in response to her critics' demand for greater issues and more worthwhile people she gave them a young industrialist, John Amherst, whose mother, however, was highly connected, and Justine Brent, a nurse, who had been at the fashionable convent in Paris where Bessy Westmore, the owner of the Westmore Mills, had received her training. John Amherst marries Bessy, persuaded of her enthusiasm for his plans of improving the condition of the workers at Westmore. He finds himself immersed in the social milieu of *The House of Mirth*. Bessy is hopelessly injured by a fall from her horse, and Justine, to end her useless suffering, administers an over-dose of morphine. She afterwards marries Amherst, with this secret between them, which causes later a breach, healed by the devotion between Justine and John's step-child. Here are the fixed ingredients of Mrs. Wharton's fiction, moral problems with a social background. The chief problem, the right to take life to end suffering, was already a bit shopworn from the handling of other

customers, and the social background remained unrealized. In reaching out for worth-while characters, she lost her grasp on the world in which they live. The industrial situation at Westmore is amusingly vague; the labor problem is approached through a succession of hospitals, soup-kitchens, recreation-rooms, playgrounds and night schools which one would like to take ironically but cannot; Long Island society is represented by a few hastily daubed figures as unreal as the Fifth Avenue mannequins in *The Hairy Ape*. As in George Eliot's later novels (which Mrs. Wharton prefers to the earlier) one feels the immense effort of the author to meet the responsibilities, moral and artistic, which her success has put upon her; and in the management of the final separation and reconciliation one is reminded of Swinburne's acrid comment on the conclusion of *Romola*—the immense amount of heaving and hauling necessary to warp that galleon into an unsuspected port.

There was wide variation in the comment on *The Fruit of the Tree*. The momentum of success carried it by many critics, among whom *The Nation* (October 17, 1907) proclaimed: "Again Mrs. Wharton has done a difficult thing with ease and precision. With

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all the groping and stumbling of American novelists toward an interpretation of American life it is matter for thanksgiving that we have one who knows what she is about." Later criticism has not supported this view. Even Mr. Percy Lubbock in *The Quarterly* (January, 1915) says gently of *The Fruit of the Tree*, "She seems to fasten upon her theme with some uncertainty, and in consequence to leave it both incomplete and rather diffusely amplified"; while to *The Bookman* (May, 1911) it "represents the greatest gulf between purpose and achievement of any of her books."

In 1911 came *Ethan Frome* published in Scribner's Magazine from August to October. This little masterpiece represented a completely new departure for Mrs. Wharton, and a break with all her literary precedents. She forsook urban society and problems of the conscience for naked human character expressing itself in a situation of unmitigated misery against the bleak New England landscape. Once more Mrs. Wharton achieved double success, and this time of far more enduring quality than in *The House of Mirth*. As one reads *Ethan Frome* today the lines are as firm and the colors as clear and unfaded as on the first reading, a dozen years ago.

Critics have been nearly unanimous in appreciation of *Ethan Frome*. The Nation of October 26, 1911, said:

"The wonder is that the spectacle of so much pain can be made to yield so much beauty. And here the full range of Mrs. Wharton's imagination becomes apparent. There is possible, within the gamut of human experience, an exaltation of anguish which makes a solitude for itself, whose direct contemplation seals the impulse of speech and strikes cold upon the heart. Yet sometimes in reflection there is revealed, beneath the writhing torment, the lineaments of a wronged and distorted loveliness. It is the piteous and intolerable conception which the Greeks expressed in the Medusa head that Mrs. Wharton has dared to hold up to us anew, but the face she shows us is the face of our own people."

Mr. Carl van Doren in the same magazine for January 12, 1921, speaks for later criticism in saying: "Not since Hawthorne has a novelist built on the New England soil a tragedy of such elevation of mood as this."

In *The Reef* (1912) Mrs. Wharton turned to the cosmopolitan novel. The protagonists are American, but they play their parts against a foreign background with which they are connected by diplomacy and marriage. *The Reef* is Mrs. Wharton's most ambitious effort

in the construction of a novel about a pervading plot. George Darrow, on his way to Givré to receive the answer to his wooing from Anna Leath, is intercepted at the Channel crossing by a telegram from her, postponing his visit. In a revulsion of disappointment and despair at lacking further explanation, he falls into an adventure with Sophie Viner, an American girl whom he meets at the Dover pier, who needs his help. Months later when after further communication with Anna he at length reaches Givré, he finds Sophie Viner installed as governess of Anna's daughter, and the fiancée of her stepson. In this situation it behooves him to walk warily, and he accordingly cooperates with Miss Viner in the effort to conceal their past. But bit by bit their story tells itself, and there is left the readjustment between Anna's conscience, a joint product of Puritan New York and the French *foyer*, and her new knowledge of the world. This readjustment is merely debate and casuistry, and for Sophie Viner's fate Mrs. Wharton escapes into sheer irony, but the conclusion, dramatically ineffective, is humanly sound. Mrs. Wharton gives to the denouement all that the situation will yield.

The "unpleasantness" of the story and its

dramatic ineptness were grounds of general disapproval on the part of American critics. The Nation (December 12, 1912) pointed out that the situation was a blind alley, offering no proper exit satisfactory to the reader's sense of dramatic and ethical requirements. "*The Reef* even more clearly than *The House of Mirth* is built upon a theme impossible of dramatic solution. . . . Stripped of the verbal felicities and subtleties, of the air of grave absorption in the human scene, of the elegances of social setting, which are Mrs. Wharton's familiar secrets, the story is a paltry one or nearly that." The Bookman (January, 1913) on the contrary found the situation "dramatically strong," but ethically weak. "The trouble lies rather in the lack of moral strength on the part of all the characters involved. Everybody guesses the truth; indeed, the perspicuity they all show argues an unclean mind, an abnormal readiness to suspect the worst. But nobody does anything worthy of the situation."

The Custom of the Country, which ran as a serial in Scribner's for 1913, bears somewhat the same relation to *The Reef* as *The Fruit of the Tree* to *The House of Mirth*. For it Mrs. Wharton developed the old family background

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in contact with modern social enterprise, both in New York and France. The story is the career of Undine Spragg of Apex City as she passes by way of matrimony and divorce from the Stentorian Hotel to Washington Square, and thence to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, to achieve the final triumph of her cosmopolitanism with Elmer Moffatt, her first husband, also originally of Apex City. As in *The Fruit of the Tree*, Mrs. Wharton uses a coarse brush, but her palette is social satire instead of social uplift. As in the case of *The House of Mirth*, she established a character who has outlived the book, but it must be said that Undine Spragg owes part of her immortality to her name. She represents the voracious ambition which Mrs. Wharton had come to recognize as the dominant characteristic of the new woman of America; but, trained in a harder school than Lily Bart, Undine knows how to get what she wants, and has no scruples about immediately wanting something else. She feeds on men, her father, Abner E. Spragg, her husband, Ralph Marvell, the Marquis de Chelles, and finally Elmer Moffatt, who represent various types of the primitive masculine weakness.

Undine Spragg was taken very seriously.

The Athenæum (November 15, 1913), rejoiced to find in her the flower of "a state of society as chaotic, crude and purely imitative as that of Hayti or Liberia, but full of force and held together by a curious patriotism." She furnished the reviewer the illustration for a comparison of American women to spoiled Circassian beauties, and he could do no less in return than applaud Mrs. Wharton for making her "a natural and pathetic figure," and for "winning for a cold and selfish character the kindly sympathy which comes from understanding." Mr. Huneker thought her important enough to be included along with Hedda Gabler and Mildred Lawson in *Three Disagreeable Girls* (Forum, November, 1914).

In *Summer* (1917) Mrs. Wharton returned to the New England of Ethan Frome. Once more she showed her capacity for renouncing the complexities of highly civilized society and the manners and mannerisms which pertain to them, and dealing with simple country life—but not with the same success. *Summer* lacks the compression under which the force of *Ethan Frome* is generated. Charity Royall is seen from the outside and from a distance, without the revealing touches which make

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Ethan a figure of comprehended tragedy. It is as if Mrs. Wharton had determined to practice a severely objective method upon a character lacking dignity and charm, and had become herself indifferent to the experiment. To Mr. Francis Hackett (*The New Republic*, July 14, 1917) she seems to load the dice against her heroine much as she loaded them against Lily Bart:

“What one dislikes in *Summer* is the undoubted purpose of the author to dish the heroine for the sake of the sensation of dishing her. One really suffers on account of the pace at which Mrs. Wharton hurries over the poignancy of a human record to arrive at a cruel predicament. The feeling is certainly established before the end that as a human being Charity Royall is nothing to her author, is merely a creature to be substantiated in detail in order that a dramatic sensation can be properly pulled off, and the curtain rung down before a breathless audience.”

By this time Mrs. Wharton was fully absorbed in interests and activities excited by the war. A confirmed resident of Paris, in intimate relations with French men and women of distinction, a frequent visitor to the provinces and in contact with a people whom she admired and loved, she was moved by a pa-

triotism as sincere and ardent as if her native country had been in danger. As a distinguished personage she was given ample opportunity to see the war at close range, through the official glasses at Paris, and through her own eyes at the front. During 1915 her visits to different parts of the theatre of the war provided material for a series of articles in Scribner's Magazine, afterwards published in the volume, *Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort*. These rapid sketches revived the memory of the pleasant, *riante* countryside with its homely villages and noble monuments which she had described in her earlier volume, but her chief concern was with the fringe of horror which bordered it—the devastated fields, the shattered towns, the murdered homes with their pathetic household treasures exposed to view, the wretched people fleeing before the enemy or creeping from the ruins of their homes where they had lain submerged until the tide of invasion had ebbed again—and beyond that fringe, the stern, ordered battle-front. Mrs. Wharton saw all phases of the conflict, from the distracted efforts of her countrymen in Paris to save France, to the fighting in the trenches, and her book is one of the most vivid and com-

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prehensive panoramas to be found in the huge literature of the war.

Mrs. Wharton's theory of the war was a simple one. She saw it as the defense of home and fireside against the premeditated assault of a horde of brutal invaders. To her Germany was simply the Beast; and the thin line from Basle to Dunkerque was the frontier of civilization. The acts of specific and individual brutality on the part of the invaders which were reported to her she accepted as exemplifications of their racial character, and the ruthless destruction of war she attributed to a settled purpose of devastation—"not that some great military end might be gained or the length of the war curtailed, but that wherever the shadow of Germany falls, all things should wither at the root." With other American residents of France she found the failure of their home-land to come to the rescue of their adopted country explainable only on grounds of a crass lack of understanding and feeling, or material selfishness; and when America entered the war she was acutely sensible of an attitude which gave to its participation the aspect of an absurd and vainglorious crusade.

This is the theme of *The Marne* (1918), a moving little story of an American boy who

was in Paris in the first days of the war and returned to America aflame with the glory of the Marne to find among his countrymen at first indifference and contempt, and later blatant boasting on their own part and insulting patronage of France.

“‘We must teach the French efficiency,’ they all said with glowing condescension. The women were even more sure of their mission. ‘France must be purified,’ these young Columbias proclaimed. ‘Frenchmen must be taught to respect Women. We must protect our boys from contamination . . . the dreadful theatres . . . and the novels . . . and the Boulevards. Of course, we mustn’t be hard on the French . . . for they’ve never known Home Life or the Family, but we must show them . . . we must set the example.’”

Troy Belknap finally gets to France as an ambulance driver just before the German advance of 1918. As he is waiting by the side of his damaged car, a regiment of Americans passes him, going into action in the second battle of the Marne. Forgetful of his duties, he joins them; unrecognized in the darkness, he volunteers for a scouting expedition, is hit while trying to carry back a wounded soldier, and comes to himself in the hospital, proud of having shared in the victory. It is a sim-

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ple, moving rendering of the theme of military glory which reminds one that if wars are planned by the minds of old men and sustained by the emotions of women they are fought by boys.

This year saw another brilliant return to fiction with *The Age of Innocence*, published also in the *Revue de Deux Mondes* as a serial, *Au Temps de l'Innocence* (November 15, 1920—February 1, 1921). To this novel Mrs. Wharton brought the material which must be accounted her choicest, and which she had hitherto used only for background, the social life of old New York. Through the memories of her girlhood we enter a group of families, almost as limited and compact as one of Jane Austen's neighborhoods, and similarly united by a single interest, their survival as the fittest through an accepted system of matrimonial alliances. We become acquainted in the flesh with persons who have hitherto been names to us, the van der Luydens, and the Dagonets, Mr. Sillery Jackson, and Mrs. Manson Mingott. The plot is a simple one, the engagement and marriage of Newland Archer to May Welland, his passion for her cousin, the Countess Olenska, who has been the victim of a European marriage, and his redemption to

good form and useful citizenship by his wife, who plays a trump card traditional in English fiction from the days when it chiefly inhabited Newgate—she pleads her belly. The theme, as Mr. A. E. W. Mason complained in *The Bookman* (December, 1920), is “a trifle thin and more than a trifle familiar,” but the richness of the material in which it is imbedded and the symmetry of its arrangement gives to the book a beauty of composition beyond any other of Mrs. Wharton’s novels, while the atmosphere of the past enfolds it with the mellowness of Indian summer. The *London Times* and *The Saturday Review* were troubled by certain anachronisms, particularly Mrs. Wharton’s attribution to her characters of the occult power to read the works of Paul Bourget and Vernon Lee, but these seem to have escaped the notice of American reviewers, who were once more enthusiastic. Mr. Carl van Doren wrote in *The Nation* (November 3, 1920) :

“The Age of Innocence is a masterly achievement. In lonely contrast to almost all the novelists who write about fashionable New York she knows her world . . . The characters who move with such precision and veracity through the ritual of a frozen caste, are here as real as their actual lives would ever

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have let them be. They are stiff with ceremonial garments and heavy with the weight of imagined responsibilities. Mrs. Wharton's triumph is that she has described these rites and surfaces and burdens as familiarly as if she loved them, and as lucidly as if she hated them."

The life of a novelist in modern days is a comparatively short one, in view of the rapid expansion of fiction into new fields, and the changes of public taste. Since Mrs. Wharton began to write, public favor had been won and in some cases lost by novelists who practised a sterner realism, a more informed social criticism, and a more penetrating psychological analysis than hers, by Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, J. D. Beresford, W. L. George, D. H. Lawrence, May Sinclair, W. J. Locke, Gilbert Cannan, Somerset Maugham, E. M. Forster, Hugh Walpole, Compton Mackenzie, in England, and Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Joseph Hergesheimer and Willa Cather in America. It is a fair indication of Mrs. Wharton's "expectancy" that she should have held her own so long against such contenders. It is a sign of her vitality that she should calmly appear among them with a book which in substance and in

attitude toward life reflected exactly her position of twenty years earlier, and in form differed only in being better done—and win a literary and popular success. The award to her of the Pulitzer prize for the novel of the year “which best presents the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood” would have surprised the founder of the prize, as it doubtless surprised its recipient; but on terms broader than those laid down in the deed of gift it was amply justified. The award of the gold medal for literature by the Institute of Arts and Letters in 1924 was a further recognition of the claim of her achievement to the first place in contemporary American letters.

Of Mrs. Wharton's later fiction it is not necessary to write at length. *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) takes us back to the frivolous American society with which she had dealt in *The House of Mirth*, this time in its European setting. Susy Branch is in the position of Lily Bart, a parasite, who with Nick Lansing, likewise a parasite, forms an alliance, solemnized by matrimony, for the exploitation of the world. The turning of this singular *mariage de convenance* into a mar-

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riage of true minds, by love and faith and generosity, is Mrs. Wharton's story, a modernized version of Thackeray's favorite theme, treated with a kindly feeling akin to his. *A Son at the Front* (1923) revives the Paris of war-time; and the problem of double loyalty which confronted the expatriate, half American, half French, is solved as Mrs. Wharton would have it, by surrender and sacrifice to France.

For her latest fiction Mrs. Wharton has returned to her best material, Old New York, which gives title to the collection of four stories published in 1924. It is worthy of note that these are animated by the same interests, culture, class and morality, which marked Mrs. Wharton's earliest stories. *The Old Maid* and *New Year's Day* deal with the explosive element of sex, muffled by the thick hangings of social decencies. *False Dawn* takes us back to an earlier period than Mrs. Wharton had yet visited, the forties, and gives us an echo of the kulturkampf of Preraphaelitism. The hero on his grand tour meets Ruskin and comes back to New York to try to introduce the primitives to his stiff-necked generation. These later stories lack the fire and fervor of Mrs. Wharton's noon, with rays of epigrams beating

down from a vertical sun. Instead they have a softness and languor as of an autumn afternoon, a little melancholy in their frost-touched peace.

IV

WE have thus far sketched Mrs. Wharton's literary biography, and followed the history of her literary reputation through the criticism which represents her relation to her time. Mrs. Wharton herself had no high opinion of her critics. In *The Criticism of Fiction* in the London Times, reprinted in Littell's Living Age (July 25, 1914), she asserts that "such criticism is practically non-existent in England and America. The ascidian criticizes the irritation to which it reacts, but its rudimentary contractions are not varied by the nature of the irritating agent. And it is hardly too much to say that English-speaking criticism is in the ascidian stage and throws out or retracts its blind feelers with the same indiscrimination of movement." One result of our study hitherto has been to show a certain growth in discrimination and systematic, intelligent use of the critical faculty during the period. For this advance Mrs. Wharton is herself in some measure responsible. She furnished the object lesson of a

steadily exercised and maturing creative talent, which challenged American criticism to rise to the occasion which she provided, and stimulated it to meet her on the high level of her own competence. And she has herself supplied the specifications upon which the systematic appraisal of her work should be based.

The first sentence of Mrs. Wharton's *Italian Backgrounds*, which has reference to the historic experience of passing from the Alps into Italy, is a sort of keynote of her literary life. "To pass from the region of the obviously picturesque—from the country contrived, it would seem, for the delectation of the *coeur à poésie facile*—to that sophisticated landscape where the face of nature seems moulded by the passions and imaginings of man, is one of the most suggestive transitions in the rapidly diminishing range of such experience." Mrs. Wharton early crossed the Alps—perhaps it would be truer to say that she was always crossing them—abandoning the mountains of feeling to the *coeur à poésie facile*, and seeking the plain of cultivated fields, ordered by reason and intelligence. She was first of all a novelist of civilization. This is the explanation of her perpetual nostalgia for old lands, which offered her a landscape

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“moulded by the passions and imaginings of man,” instead of the crude scenery which her native country provided in such abundance. “Here in northern France,” she declares at the beginning of her *Motor-Flight*, “where agriculture has mated with poetry, one understands the higher beauty of land developed, humanized, brought into relation to life and history, as compared with the raw material with which the greater part of our own hemisphere is still clothed. In France everything speaks of long familiar intercourse between the earth and its inhabitants.”

This preference for landscape, in its literal sense of land shaped or fashioned, over scenery limited Mrs. Wharton's view of physical America to its more highly cultivated portions, chiefly along the Hudson River. Her wildest excursions were into New England, where indeed the intercourse between the earth and its inhabitants had been long, but where the earth had proved recalcitrant, never yielding more than a sparse tribute to its rulers. This is the pathos of the New England country as Mrs. Wharton sees it, where nature is always in armed neutrality toward its invaders, not entering into kindly alliance with them as in France.

One of the happiest results of long familiar intercourse between the earth and man is the growth of a civilization in which every individual has a place, an order which finds superficial expression in manners, and deeper reality in instinctive cooperation among the inhabitants in a spirit truly social, in which even material objects contribute to the composition and acquire the fitness of "properties." This is the secret of the charm of the French people as Mrs. Wharton sees it in her *Motor-Flight*:

"They each had their established niche in life, the frankly avowed interests and preoccupations of their order, their pride in the smartness of the canal-boat, the seductions of the show-window, the glaze of the *brioche*s, the crispness of the lettuce. And this admirable *fitting into the pattern*, which seems almost as if it were a moral outcome of the universal French sense of form, has led the race to the happy, the momentous discovery that good manners are a short cut to one's goal, that they lubricate the wheels of life instead of obstructing them. This discovery—the result, it strikes one, of the application of the finest of mental instruments to the muddled process of living—seems to have illuminated not only the social relation but its outward, concrete expression, producing a finish in the material setting of life, a kind of conformity in inanimate things—forming, in short, the background of the spectacle through which

we pass, the canvas on which it is painted, and expressing itself no less in the trimness of each individual garden than in that insistence on civic dignity and comeliness so miraculously maintained, through every torment of political passion, every change of social conviction, by a people resolutely addressed to the intelligent enjoyment of living."

In contrast to this Mrs. Wharton is oppressed by the bareness of contact, verbal and behavioristic, among her own countrymen. The tragedy of Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver is in their inarticulateness. They are submerged beneath the tides of their fate, unable to get their heads above water to call out even to each other. For the most part Mrs. Wharton resorts for her material to the circles in which the process of sociability has been carried farthest, and the crudeness of association most relieved by cultivated speech and behavior. The interest of her world is not, as Mr. Hackett notes, mere "fatuous fashionableness," but the opportunity which it offers for intensive personal relations and poignant human intercourse within the forms and ceremonies which have become the commonplaces of social life. As she remarks in *Madame de Treymes*, "One of the charms of a sophisticated society is that it lends point and perspective to the slightest

contact between the sexes." A frame of convention is at once a restraint and a stimulus to the joy of living. Thus Mrs. Wharton is in the highest sense a novelist of manners. In her essay on Henry James in his *Letters* (Quarterly, July, 1920) she quotes approvingly his words to that staunch realist, W. D. Howells, who pleaded for a simpler and more elemental approach to human problems:

"It is on manners, customs, usages, habits, forms, upon all these things, matured and established, that a novelist lives—they are the very stuff his work is made of; and in saying that in the absence of those 'dreary and worn out paraphernalia' which I enumerate as being wanting in American society, we have simply the whole of human life left, you beg (to my sense) the question. I should say we had just so much less of it as these same paraphernalia represent, and I think they represent an enormous quantity of it."

This is the root of Mrs. Wharton's feeling for class, for an aristocracy in which, to the facility of communication permitted by the possession of a common language whereby intercourse may be carried on simultaneously with the spoken work, is added the prestige of a highly distinguished, richly ornamented, ancestral background. She remembered a remark

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of Henry James in a discussion on the relative merits of *Anna Karénina* and *Madame Bovary*, and quoted it in the article mentioned. "Oh, but one paints the fierce passions of a luxurious aristocracy; the other deals with the petty miseries of a little bourgeoisie in a provincial town." Mrs. Wharton probably did not feel that the luxurious aristocracy of her own United States developed any great distinction in their fierce passions. A social order with standards of good form, and an established ritual of decorum, however, was to be found in the hierarchy of leading families which ruled New York in her youth. It would be interesting to know by whom she was inducted into the anecdotal and social mysteries of old New York, as was Scott in Edinburgh by his mother and his grandfather. Through some such initiation Edith Wharton must have come into possession of the material of the past, toward which the windows of her imagination were wide open. Her own youthful experience and observation supplied detail and color. It was thus that she gained the necessary immersion in her material; and the equally important detachment from it came from her ironic temperament and the intellectual attitude of her time, which she shared.

In her description of the archaic society of *The Age of Innocence* she uses frequently the concept of the tribe, with its tribal principles and tabus, the most important of which existed to secure its own survival and purity of race by breeding, and its protection against social contamination by exclusion from its environment of alien elements. She recognizes the futility of this effort in the face of the assaults of the Philistines—the Rosedales and Moffatts and Beauforts—from without, and the insidious disease of luxury working within. She sees that in America, against the need and power of money and the lure of sex, tribal instincts and customs, family pride and hereditary principles are bound to go down, and their upholders can at best fight a rear guard action. Hers is the same tale that Thackeray had told of the wasting away of an aristocracy. Like Thackeray she has a strong feeling for family, and the threads of family connection run through her novels as they do through *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*, making the warp and woof of the social fabric. And like Thackeray she enjoys to the full those occasions when the champions of their order advance in momentary strength and splendor of action, as when Major Pen-

dennis disposes of Morgan. There is nothing elsewhere in her work so much in the grand style as the intervention of the van der Luydens, their victorious assertion of the leadership of the clan and rout of pretenders to their authority. In France the hereditary order, older and more strongly entrenched, was the object of her wistful and fascinated contemplation; but the Faubourg Saint-Germain no less than Washington Square goes down before the assault of Undine Spragg.

In her search for the equivalent of a class bearing the external marks of distinction pertaining to aristocracies, she found in her own day the learned, cultivated, artistic group. Moreover, she had a profound belief in the function of art and the artist class in civilization, in their effect in "humanizing the landscape," and in her early work she paid extraordinary attention to them. She built up a mythology of great names and great works which appear as a formal masque, to which their imitators form a sort of comic antimasque. There are the great poet Rendle in *The Muse's Tragedy*; Irene Astarte Pratt, author of *The Fall of Man*, and her degenerate daughter, Mrs. Amyot, who lives by purveying a spurious information to culture clubs, in *The Peli-*

can; the master painter, George Lillo, in *The Portrait*; Mrs. Aubyn in *The Touchstone*, Professor Linyard and his *Vital Thing* in *The Descent of Man*; the Bishop of Ossining with his *Through a Glass Brightly* and his niece Mrs. Fetherly with her *Fast and Loose* in *Expiation*. In *The Duchess at Prayer*, the statue is furnished by Cavaliere Bernini; in *The Angel at the Grave* the solemn fame of Dr. Anson is reduced to a pamphlet on Amphioxus. *The Recovery* is that of the American painter Keniston; *Copy* turns on the exchange of memorials of their past between Mrs. Dale, famous novelist, and Ventnor, no less famous poet. In *The Moving Finger* the action revolves about Claydon's portrait of Mrs. Grancy. *The Daunt Diana* and *The Rembrandt* concern the fate of masterpieces true and false. *Full Circle* introduces Betton the novelist of *Diadems and Faggots*, and *Abundance*. *The Legend* is the story of the incognito of Pellerin, novelist and philosopher, who returns to participate with his critics in his posthumous fame. In *Afterward* we have Boyne, laboring on his *Economic Basis of Culture*; in *The Debt*, Dredge the biologist of *The Arrival of the Fittest* is perplexed by opposing loyalties—to the reputation of his

predecessor and benefactor and to science; in *Xingu* we return to the realm of the culture club with Mrs. Ballinger, that "indomitable huntress of erudition," authoress of *Wings of Death*. Mrs. Wharton's longer novels are not without a sprinkling of poets, novelists, painters, sculptors and professors; Nick Lansing in *Glimpses of the Moon* is an archæologist, and John Campton in *A Son at the Front*, a painter. *False Dawn*, the best of the four stories of *Old New York*, turns on the fate of a precocious disciple of Ruskin, and his premature discovery of the primitives, in a society to which Raphael and Guido Reni represented good æsthetic form.

V

FOR a consideration of Mrs. Wharton's technique no better starting point can be found than the essay already referred to, *The Criticism of Fiction* (Living Age, July 25, 1914). She there emphasizes the chief element in the art of fiction as she understands it. "The fundamental difference between the amateur and the artist is the possession of the sense of technique, that is in its broadest meaning, of the necessity of form." For the enforcement of this principle she holds criticism responsible, and it is her chief quarrel with English-speaking critics that they so frequently ignore it and leave the art which they are supposed to direct to be practised in amateurish ignorance. "The novelist may plead as much as he pleases for the formless novel," she continues, "the unemphasized notation of a certain stretch of a certain runnel of the stream of things; but why has he chosen that particular stretch of that particular runnel? Obviously, because it reflected, or carried on its current, more things he thought worth

studying and recording. *Recording*—the act is a key to the method; for the instant one has set down certain things one has created a reason for setting down certain others, and the pattern begins to show.” The pattern, the design, she holds as essential in modern fiction as in modern architecture; and the first requisite of design is obviously a fundamental idea or theme. In *Italian Backgrounds* occurs a sentence which marks her sense of the importance of this requirement. “The world,” she says, “is divided into the Gothically and the classically minded, just as intellectually it is divided into those who rise to the general idea, and those who pause at the particular instance.” Mrs. Wharton is of the classically minded.

In respect to the general idea, writers of fiction may be said to belong to one of two schools, those who take such a thesis as their starting point and gather material for its exemplification, and those who find their initial impulse in the phenomena of life and in the course of their presentation disengage the theme which gives them meaning. George Eliot is one of the best instances of the first school. In a letter to Frederic Harrison quoted by Cross in *George Eliot's Life* (vol.

II, page 319), she dwells on the difficulties of her method—"the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me in the flesh and not in the spirit . . . the agonizing labor to an English-fed imagination to make out a sufficiently real background for the desired picture—to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience." In her own practice Mrs. Wharton shows herself an eclectic; many of her stories undoubtedly took form under the pressure of the material, the stuff of life; others, particularly her longer novels, seem to proceed from the theme, and she fully experienced the difficulty of subduing her material to its demands. But failure to arrive, in one way or another, at a general idea of high significance, and to direct the narrative in accordance with it is, in her opinion, failure in all that makes fiction an art.

It is hardly necessary to point out how remote this theory is from the typical practice of English novelists. English fiction has many distinguished qualities, but a high sense of form is not conspicuous among them. On the contrary, the typical English novel, from *Tom*

Jones to *The Way of All Flesh*, has been a loose agglomeration of incidents and characters about the personality of the hero. Biography is the natural mood of English fiction, and its effort is not so much toward an ordering of material into effective design as toward an informal approximation of life, which Henry James has happily termed "realism of experience." Against the biographical or autobiographical novel, Mrs. Wharton like Henry James protested as tending toward slipshod methods and careless workmanship—and indeed to her mind the body of English fiction of the nineteenth century fails in significance, a failure primarily intellectual, which is reflected in the lack of orderly design and structure.

"The whole immense machinery of the passions is put in motion for causes that a modern school-girl would smile at. In the greatest of the group the inexhaustible play of mirth and irony, the vividness of characterization, the poetry, the eloquence, the abundance, what rhetoricians call the number, are so overwhelming and enchanting that the rapt reader half forgets the futility of the springs of action and the infantile unreality of the moral conflict. It is as if grown people, with faces worn by passions and experience, were acting a play written in the nursery. . . . The modern English novelist is playing with his

new blocks in much the same artless spirit with which he built up the old ones on the nursery floor."

To these brilliant and wayward children, the English novelists, Mrs. Wharton saw Henry James as the master, and she was determined that he should not fail of at least one apt pupil. "The writing of fiction was still, when his career began, an unformulated art in English speaking countries," she asserts (*Quarterly*, July, 1920) and proceeds to define his conception and her own of the novel in recognizably classical terms: "For him every great novel must first of all be based on a profound sense of moral values and then constructed with a classical unity and economy of means."

Readers of Henry James's criticism do not need to be reminded how constantly he emphasized the necessity of moral values. Of Swinburne, for example, he says: "The extravagant development of the imagination is accompanied by no commensurate development either of the reason or of the moral sense." Even Balzac "had no natural sense of morality, and this we cannot help thinking a serious fault in a novelist." In his essay on George de Bernard he defines this moral deficiency: "We do not mean that he did not choose to write didac-

tic tales. . . . We mean that he had no moral emotion, no preferences, no instincts—no moral imagination, in a word.” And finally in his essay on *The Art of Fiction*, in *Partial Portraits*, he gives his final word:

“The deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind: that seems to be an axiom which for an artist in fiction will cover all needful moral ground.”

How fully Mrs. Wharton enters into the spirit of this definition needs not to be further emphasized. For her, as for James, morality is a matter of emotion, preferences, instincts, imagination. She is at one with the modern school whom Mr. Havelock Ellis has summarized in *The Dance of Life* in making ethics a part of æsthetics. Her questioning of moral dogma, her refusal to be formally didactic, was a ground of attack by her earlier critics. It threw her back on the study of the special case, and casuistry has always had a bad name among the Puritans. She relies on truth of

understanding and fineness of perception as an introduction to righteousness, and she naturally seeks characters and circles where by the process of selection and adaptation and education such qualities are cultivated. She found them among the people with whom she lived, of whom she was, and her natural material was thus in conformity with the requirements of her art.

It is true her characters exercise their fineness of perception almost entirely in their relations with one another. Their morality is chiefly of the indoor variety; and the scene of their skirmishes is the tea table or the dancing floor. With all her insistence on rising from the special case to the general idea, one wonders too often whether the case could have arisen outside the conventions of a special class. Of the relations of class with class, which is the vital issue of social morality today, she is profoundly ignorant. She has no outlook upon the great mass of humanity. America west of the Hudson she does not know, the America of which the theatres of action are the frontier and the melting pot and the great themes, pioneering conquest and the clashing and mingling of a hundred foreign and racial strains—the America of Hamlin Garland and

Frank Norris, of Willa Cather and Mary Austin. The pioneer, the immigrant, the industrial worker do not appear in her pages. Yet it would be unfair to charge Mrs. Wharton with a lack of sympathy with them. She merely does not look their way. Now and again, however, in her work there is a note of understanding and feeling for the masses. In *A Motor-Flight Through France* she pauses at the Château de Grignan with its memories of the cruel rule of its lords to remark: "If there are few spots in France where one more deeply resents the senseless havoc of the Revolution, there are few where, on second thoughts, one so distinctly understands what turned the cannon on the castle." And in *The Fruit of the Tree*, where her lack of knowledge of the condition and aspirations of labor is most apparent, she shows her feeling of the selfishness and triviality of the upper class in a single sentence: "Yes—that was wealth's contemptuous answer to every challenge of responsibility: duty, sorrow and disgrace were equally to be avoided by a change of residence, and nothing in life need be faced and fought out while one could pay for a passage to Europe."

VI

WITH her central theme fixed in the realm of moral values Mrs. Wharton finds a variety of patterns to expose it with symmetry and economy of means. If the units of her design are small and not so very numerous, she offers compensation in the abundance and intricacy of the combinations to which they are subjected. This is particularly true of her short stories, which enroll so many triumphs of narrative skill, so few failures. If this skill is shown at the expense of spontaneity, if the hand of the designer is too apparent and the means are sometimes too obviously calculated to the predetermined end, it must be remembered that she wrought as a pioneer, resolved to make fiction contribute to civilization and to treat it as a fine art.

In her novels Mrs. Wharton adopted various methods of structure. *The House of Mirth* is a series of episodes in the life of the heroine leading by a succession of accidents to the catastrophe. *The Fruit of the Tree* follows the fortunes of two characters who are

maintained in their relation to each other and to the society about them in somewhat unstable equilibrium by the use of long arm methods on the part of the author. *The Custom of the Country* is the triumphant progress of the conquering heroine, a slight element of mystery being supplied by the concealment of her earlier relation to Elmer Moffatt. In *The Reef* Mrs. Wharton essayed a novel of plot based upon complications in part made known to the reader but only gradually penetrated by the characters. The original misadventure of Darrow and Sophie is the first episode of the story, done with full, broad strokes. The engagement of Darrow to Anna Leath, also known to the reader, is concealed from Sophie, as is that between Sophie and Anna's stepson from Darrow. Each revelation gives an opportunity for a dramatic scene of high tension; and the love of Sophie for Darrow, unknown to all, even to herself, gives its final deflection to the course of the narrative. All this is brilliantly symmetrical. The failure comes when after the last of these successive revelations the story goes underground as it were in the minds of the characters; and their action, after the moment when Anna gives herself to Darrow, becomes insignificant. *Sum-*

mer is a long drawn out episode in which the characters fail to justify themselves. Royall marries Charity to give a father to her child as he had given her a home and a name; but he is too obliquely presented, his former actions are too ambiguous, to allow us full confidence in his motives. Had she made Royall the central figure of her tale she might have given us a second *Ethan Frome*. In *The Age of Innocence* once more we have a novel of plot. The complication is not strikingly ingenious, and it is managed with some mechanical awkwardness, involving the introduction of a superfluous and undefined character in Rivière, but these defects are unimportant compared with the admirable use of perspective, the placing of the story in the middle distance, as it were, from which we look before and after.

Mrs. Wharton's love of natural scene especially when humanized into landscape has already been noted. Her feeling for the countryside of Italy, France and England, the Hudson and New England, is highly discriminating. She is a master not only of general effects but of detail; she sees not only colors and contours, but leaves, grass, and flowers. Her visual impressions were undoubtedly

sharpened by her study of painting, and to the rendering of scene she constantly brings the resources of the palette. To the artificial scene of cities she had a peculiarly delicate response—the lines and lights, the expression, the very taste of Paris and London and New York are in her pages. With architecture, especially of dwellings, she is especially concerned in its reflection of the life which it shelters. Interiors and their furniture and decoration, whether works of art or the humbler material properties of the play, she handles with a deft and experienced touch, a feeling for the human quality—wisdom or pathos or comedy or vulgarity—which they connote. Scene in Mrs. Wharton's fiction is never a mere adjunct, decorative or realistic. From the beginning she showed infinite tact and taste in placing and staging her stories in order to bring out characters and situation in the perspective, surroundings, and lighting which they need. It is not an accident that the revelation of *The Muse's Tragedy* takes place in the garden of the Villa d'Este, with its memorials of suave classic beauty. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, scene reënforces the action by determining the mood of the characters in their several habitations—the joyous calm of Lake Como for the

honeymoon; the frivolous splendor and dignified corruption of Venice for the parting; the thrifty streets of Passy for reunion in a new life. Sometimes scene becomes a still more functional part of the story, entering the plot or establishing an atmosphere which carries the philosophy as truly as in Mr. Hardy's novels. In her earliest sketch, *Mrs. Manstey's View*, the glimpse of New York backyards determines the action and is in effect the chief character. In *Summer* the general topography is vague and unrealized, but the village, the hillside pastures hot in the sunshine, and the old houses on forgotten roads are the embodiment of Charity Royall's isolation and the accomplices in her undoing. In *Ethan Frome* the austere landscape of snowbound New England is the face of Nemesis.

Nowhere has Mrs. Wharton made scene more consciously and more artistically a part of her story than in *The Reef*. The action begins on the pier at Dover, in rain and wind which destroy Sophie Viner's umbrella and throw her upon Darrow's chivalry. There follows the arrival at Paris shining "in morning beauty under a sky that was all broad wet washes of white and blue." The difference in the appeal of the city to two minds introduces

us to both. Sophie "seemed hardly conscious of sensations of form and colour, or of any imaginative suggestion, and the spectacle before them—always, in its scenic splendour, so moving to her companion—broke up under her scrutiny, into a thousand minor points: the things in the shops . . . the street signs . . . the motley brightness of flower-carts, the identity of churches and public buildings that caught her eye." As for Darrow:

"For two years his eyes had been subdued to the atmospheric effects of London, to the mysterious fusion of darkly piled city and low-lying bituminous sky; and the transparency of the French air, which left the green gardens and silvery stones so softly harmonized, struck him as having a conscious intelligence. Every line of architecture, every arch of the bridges, the very sweep of the strong bright river between them, while contributing to this effect, sent forth a separate appeal to some sensitive memory; so that for Darrow, a walk through the Paris streets was always like the unrolling of a vast tapestry from which countless stored fragrances were shaken out."

Then the rain and the room at the Hotel Gare du Nord. Mrs. Wharton has a peculiar detestation of hotels, the flagrant Augean stables for mankind in its gregarious vagrancy, ene-

mies of regulated, orderly, comely relations—in short, of the home.

“It was exactly ten days since his hurried unpacking had strewn it with the contents of his portmanteaux. His brushes and razors were spread out on the blotched marble of the chest of drawers. A stack of newspapers had accumulated on the centre table under the electrolier, and half a dozen paper novels lay on the mantel-piece among cigar-cases and toilet bottles; but these traces of his passage had made no mark on the featureless dulness of the room, its look of being the makeshift setting of innumerable transient collocations. There was something sardonic, almost sinister, in its appearance of having deliberately ‘made up’ for its anonymous part, all in noncommittal drabs and browns, with a carpet and paper that nobody would remember, and chairs and tables as impersonal as railway porters.”

Thus Darrow and Sophie are drawn together by the smiles and the frowns of the Galeotto city. Givré enters the story, whither Darrow goes to meet Anna Leath. A place more accordant with his temperament cannot be imagined.

“They stopped for a moment to look back at the long, pink house-front, plainer, friendlier, less adorned than on the side toward the court. So prolonged yet delicate had been the friction of time

upon its bricks that certain expanses had the bloom and texture of old red velvet, and the patches of gold lichen spreading over them looked like the last traces of a dim embroidery."

A few days later Darrow with his secret staring him in the face again approaches this dwelling of ancient dignity and kindly peace.

"At length the house-front raised before him its expanse of damp-silvered brick, and he was struck afresh by the high decorum of its calm lines and soberly massed surfaces. It made him feel, in the turbid coil of his fears and passions, like a muddy tramp forcing his way into some pure sequestered shrine."

The Reef is the most elaborately wrought of Mrs. Wharton's novels. In no respect is its conscious art more marked than in the organic treatment of scene.

If to Mrs. Wharton the construction and decoration of her fiction is an effort sometimes too apparent, she finds compensation in her drawing of character. It is here that her material comes to her in greatest affluence, and her art shows itself in its most spontaneous and personal aspect. She deals for the most part with a world which she knows thoroughly, of which the interests are her own, and in which

men and women constantly challenge her great gifts of observation and interpretation. It is a world in which the stream of consciousness runs full and strong, in which deliberation is closely connected with action, and the mind sits in judgment on the heart. Mrs. Wharton belongs with the English novelists who have relied upon conscious intelligence as opposed to sentiment and instinct, with Jane Austen, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Henry James, rather than with Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy. Among her present contemporaries she continues to represent that school. She has been little affected by the resurgence of the unconscious through the teachings of Freud. She gives her characters sharp, clear, consistent outlines, as opposed to mysticism and dissociation which is so marked a feature in the characters of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, Miss May Sinclair, and Mrs. Virginia Woolf.

In presenting characters Mrs. Wharton seldom allows them the first person. She realizes that, however intelligent they may be, their behavior can never be fully rationalized by themselves. She therefore shows them through the medium of an observing and directing intelligence, a device which is necessary to give

to the record of their experience the general application, the economy, and the symmetry required by the classic ideal toward which she strives. The wellings-up from the turbid depths of the subconscious she prefers to treat by the symbolism of the supernatural, and to draw the obscure creatures of the depths into the light of day as apparitions—itself a classical device.

In the fully developed characters of her novels she shows a complete and unhesitating control of their mental processes. Nothing is suppressed: Lily Bart and Selden in *The House of Mirth*, John Amherst and Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree*, Ralph Marvell and Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* are represented with the fullest assurance, and if the psychology seems at times made to fit the story (as notably it is in *Madame de Treymes* and *Sanctuary*) the presiding intelligence assumes full responsibility for it. It is naturally in *The Reef* that this control of motivation through the mental processes of the characters is most complete. George Darrow as an intelligent man of the world knows that “most wrong-doing works, on the whole, less mischief than its useless confession,” and accordingly he enters upon the course of decep-

tion which is constantly interrupted by events compelling readjustment. George Darrow is Mrs. Wharton's answer to critics who affirm that she cannot draw men. He is as fully realized as Lily Bart. His attitude toward life is a far more complex affair, and it is rendered with far greater subtlety. Throughout the book he is under cross-examination, indeed under what the Inquisition called "the question," and the movement of his mind in response to temptation, interrogation, and torture, its advances and recoils, is laid bare with extraordinary precision. As for Anna Leath, Mr. Percy Lubbock, writing with the pen of Henry James (*Quarterly*, January, 1915), tells us that Mrs. Wharton "was never more happily at home with her material." She "understands and threads the whole glowing labyrinth of Anna's mind without an instant of hesitation." The study is "the most compellingly beautiful thing in all her work."

In her major characters Mrs. Wharton shows the influence of the school of psychological analysis to which George Eliot gave vogue in the nineteenth century. For minor figures she likewise had George Eliot's example in the rapid, impressionistic method which came from Dickens and the whole line

of English humorists. She quotes with approval in her paper on Sir Leslie Stephen's life of George Eliot (The Bookman, May, 1902) the description of Mr. Cadwallader "a large man very plain and rough in his exterior, but with that solid, imperturbable ease and good humor which is infectious, *and like great grassy hills in the sunshine* quiets even an irritated egotism." Such impressionism easily becomes caricature, as when Mrs. Tulliver is compared to a patriarchal goldfish "which apparently retains its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass. Mrs. Tulliver was an amiable fish of this kind, and after running her head against this same resisting medium for thirteen years would go at it again today with undulled alacrity." Is not this precisely the note of the description of Mrs. Ballinger in *Xingu*? "Her mind was an hotel where facts came and went like transient lodgers, without leaving their address behind, and frequently without paying for their board."

Other devices Mrs. Wharton drew from the tradition of English humor, and used in her early work. The trick of concentrating attention on a physical trait is illustrated in *The Pelican*, where Mrs. Amyot's dimple is the

symbol of her personality—"the dimple which came out at my greeting as punctually as a cuckoo in a Swiss clock," "the tired dimple, as it were, bowed me out and closed the door." In the case of Mr. Spragg it is the invisible toothpick which becomes the habitual symbol of his reflection. In *A Coward* Mr. Carstyle is repeatedly put before us by this humorously behavioristic method, "his vague oblique step and the stoop that suggested the habit of dodging missiles," his "expression of a man determined to prove an alibi." Dredge in *The Debt*, in his relation to the family of his benefactor, "continued to lavish on them a floundering devotion as inconvenient as the endearments of a dripping dog." In *The Rembrandt*, Mr. Rose is established for us by similar touches: "His ideas were as simple and inconsecutive as the propositions in a primer, and he spoke slowly with the kind of emphasis that made his words stand out like the raised type for the blind." Eleanor Copt in the same story has "a tone almost chromo-lithographic in its vivacity of impressions." Her character is revealed to us in a flash of insight. "Eleanor is porous and I knew that sooner or later the unnecessary truth would exude through the loose texture of her dissimulation. Not infre-

quently she thus creates the misery she alleviates: and I have sometimes suspected her of paining people in order that she might be sorry for them."

There is in this method a certain condescension, a kind of intellectual snobbishness which Mrs. Wharton's critics resented. The metallic glitter of the epigrams which she put in play about the heads of quite harmless and well intentioned people made her readers uneasy, and the popular sense of intellectual and cultural democracy still strong in America was outraged by so easy a display of superiority. This superiority was readily confused with social snobbishness, since her preference for people on her own intellectual level was naturally satisfied among those of inherited culture and taste. But her preference, it may be repeated, is not merely for the well-born and well placed as such. As one of her critics has remarked, it is not so much the upper as the inner class which attracts her attention and sympathy. Her contempt is for the aspirants to a position which they do not deserve, the pretenders to a culture which they do not possess. In her human comedy she has a particular place for characters who appear in situations to which they are utterly incongruous;

but contrast her treatment of Adelaide Painter, in *The Reef*, the lady from Braintree, Mass., who ruggedly preserves her revolutionary independence amid the Circean enchantments of Paris, and Mrs. Heeny, the facile parasite in *The Custom of the Country*, the one a subject of dignified amusement, the other of scornful laughter.

In bringing her characters together in attitudes of significant opposition, in grouping them with effective stagecraft, Mrs. Wharton displays highly conscious artistry, the complex result of her study of her predecessors and contemporaries, English and French. Of dramatic scene, in which the characters are kept alive before us by speech, gesture, action, absorbing our attention by light but significant touches, she is a master. Like a playwright she makes effective use of the tension when a single person is thrown into opposition to a united group. The careers of Lily Bart and Undine Spragg are full of such moments—Undine's reception at the Dagonets' in Washington Square and at the hôtel de Chelles are companion pieces; and beside them are to be placed the scenes of Ellena Olenska's reëstablishment among her New York clansmen. The successive confrontations of George Dar-

row by the various combinations of Anna Leath, her step-son Owen, her mother-in-law, Madame de Chantelle, and Sophie Viner, have the effect of dramatic climax. It is the thoroughness of her proceeding on these occasions which attracts Mr. Percy Lubbock's admiration. "Her intention has been to leave no image and no moment unscrutinized, to analyze every impression, to interrogate every conclusion."

Of human speech she is an apt student. It has been objected that her favored characters talk too much in her own compressed and epigrammatic style, that their conversation is too good to be true. This quality is naturally the result of her effort to bring out the meaning of the situation, to charge the drama with the theme, to invest a human situation with the significance of artistic design. The same criticism of sacrificing realism to intention is levelled against George Eliot, George Meredith, and Henry James, and with more pertinence. Mrs. Wharton never puts essays or sermons into the mouths of her protagonists, nor does she create for them a special medium as remote from ordinary human speech as Shakespearean blank verse. And she has mastered with remarkable precision the speech of certain classes,

the formal utterance of the denizens of the high places of old New York, the redolent slang of the Philistines who are ousting them, the realistic tone of arrivistes from Apex City, the patter of culture clubs, the jargon of studios, and the homely dialect of New England. Individuals emerge from these groups as one recalls them. Mrs. Heeny is as racy as Mrs. Gamp; and Zeena Frome challenges comparison with any of George Eliot's Warwickshire peasants, as she holds up her medicine bottle to the light. "It ain't done me a speck of good, but I guess I might as well use it up," she remarked; adding as she pushed the empty bottle toward Mattie: "If you can get the taste out it'll do for pickles."

In an æsthetic as well as a social sense Mrs. Wharton is the novelist of class. She sees human life in categories. As has been said, her conception of class is limited. The background of the human mass is barely perceptible through her high windows, and the immense rumor of the collective human voice is muffled by thick curtains, but within her world the gregariousness of the human animal is one of the most diverting phenomena. Whether it appears as the close intricately woven fabric of old New York families, the loose texture of

the society which has replaced them, or the mere heap of human ravellings clinging to one another by a sort of woolly adhesion, it affords endless food for her spirit of comedy. The American hotel, that warehouse of baled social waste, designed as Mr. Oliver Herford once remarked, "to give exclusiveness to the masses," receives its apotheosis in *The Stenorian*, in *The Custom of the Country*, but her treatment of it is gentle compared with her comment on the life of a European caravan-sary in the same novel.

"The inmates of the hotel were of different nationalities, but their racial differences were levelled by the stamp of a common mediocrity. All differences of tongues, of custom, of physiognomy disappeared in this deep community of insignificance, which was like some secret bond, with the manifold signs and passwords of its ignorances and its imperceptions. It was not the heterogeneous mediocrity of the American summer hotel, where the lack of any standard is the nearest approach to a tie, but an organized, codified dulness, in conscious possession of its rights, and strong in the voluntary ignorance of others."

Mrs. Wharton's individual characters constantly tend to present themselves as representations of the class to which they belong, or

perhaps it would be more correct to say that she sees the class exemplifying itself in the individual. The clearest examples of this tendency are to be found among minor characters. The Boykins in *Madame de Treymes* are merely representatives of American expatriates, with pretensions toward the society of the country which they have adopted, but which has not adopted them. Their thought, speech and action are all directed to this end, and Mrs. Wharton's comment clinches the matter.

“In the isolation of their exile they had created about them a kind of America where the national prejudice contrived to flourish unchecked by the national progressiveness, a little world sparsely peopled by compatriots in the same attitude of chronic opposition toward a society chronically unaware of them.”

VII

IN her essay on *The Criticism of Fiction*, Mrs. Wharton restricts the formula of the critic to two questions: "What has the author tried to present and how far has he succeeded?" For the answer to the first, in general, she would doubtless accept the definition of the novel by Henry James as "a personal, direct impression of life"; and she would accept as a basis for the answer to the second his dictum that "its value is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression." The application of these principles to her work reveals at once her strength and her limitations. No one will question the fact that Mrs. Wharton's impression of life is usually direct and personal. She does not see the world as a vast field of phenomena, an infinite spectacle of the human comedy. She has marked her separation from the great masters of the panorama of life in her own literature, Fielding, Smollett, Dickens, Thackeray. She belongs to the group looking back to Richardson, who make a virtue of their limitation of

experience, and who seek in a restricted field to present the pattern of life rather than its monstrous confusion. The three principles which determine her pattern, morality, culture, and class, are the three which Richardson asserted. Her world, like his, is one of subtleties of conscience, and niceties of deportment, of respect for education and cultivation, of recognition of superiority embodied in an aristocracy. For her, it is true, morality has ceased to be the assertion of external authority, and is a matter of fine perception of the responsibilities of men and women toward each other in their mutual bonds and contacts: she is not concerned with didactic methods or the teaching of etiquette to the middle classes, but rather with what George Meredith says the English race has never spiritually comprehended, "the signification of living in society," and the enhancement of life by the finer social processes and a sense of the inheritance of beauty and order from the past. She has abandoned the crude romantic motive, common in English fiction, of promotion from the lower to the upper class as a reward of virtue. For her the intellectual class is a fact of high importance because there, through the operation of consciousness, the social experiment is car-

ried on under most favorable conditions, and the discovery of what makes life worth living is most hopefully sought. "Cultivated men and women," says George Meredith, "who do not skim the cream of life and are attached to its duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers. Molière is their poet." Meredith himself and Henry James are their novelists in England, and Edith Wharton in America. She in effect accepts the aristocratic principle current in the last century, inherent in Matthew Arnold's doctrine of culture, and put by W. H. Mallock in *The New Republic* into the mouth of Ruskin, that if we can achieve perfection in the higher class the lower will be carried along with it, in the equilibrium of society. The notion of a democratic or proletarian culture which shall absorb the upper class is not within the range of her vision.

It is true, as Fielding long ago remarked, that the upper classes make thin soil for the novel. And it is to be noted further that the American upper class is not deeply rooted in the soil by the long feudal process, but grows rapidly, rankly, in the forcing house of wealth, lacking power to seed itself, propagating by graft. The superficial and transitory character

of this class, its parasitic nature, take it outside of George Meredith's specifications. It does try to skim the cream of life, and it is not markedly attached to its duties. The nearest approach to a genuine upper class with ancestral and traditional qualifications is to be found about the sites of the three earliest settlements, among the descendants of the planters of Virginia, the patroons of New York, the traders of Massachusetts Bay. One of these groups Mrs. Wharton possessed by inheritance and in it she found her best material; but it is here where she is strongest that her inferiority to Jane Austen is apparent. The comparison has often been made between the two writers, both dealing with a limited society, both possessing similar powers of observation and penetration, of detachment and irony. The difference is that Miss Austen's people are real in spite of and because of their conventions and prejudices, which have the force of inherited characteristics. They are part of an institution, stable, self-perpetuating, permanent. They are in true relation to their environment, and racy of the soil. By contrast Mrs. Wharton's society is transitory, imitative, sterile. Miss Austen is provincial; Mrs. Wharton is colonial.

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This limitation marks further the difference between Mrs. Wharton and other social novelists of the United States, and their English contemporaries, Miss E. B. C. Jones, Miss Delafield, Mrs. Beatrice Kean Seymour, Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith. The richness of the English social background corresponds to the richness of cultivated landscape which Mrs. Wharton so much admires and envies. One is tempted to compare an English lawn of turf hundreds of years old with the greens of an American golf links, maintained by fertilizer, sprinkling and replanting until real estate speculation shall have accomplished its perfect round. English and American contemporaries alike find themselves novelists of social change, but the former have to record the slow crumbling of a tough and resisting order which in its dissolution leaves the solemn regret that "that which once was great has passed away." Mrs. Wharton's class denies her this consolation of tragedy in her art except as it is felt, by herself perhaps most keenly, as the tragedy of failure.

Mrs. Wharton's effort to supplement the resources of social class by those of culture and art is doomed for the same reason. Here

again the limitation imposed by her material is apparent. As she is unfamiliar with the America of pioneering and industry, so she is equally indifferent to the attempts, often painful and crude, to find a form which shall be expressive of the spirit of America in its travail, the symbol of its bringing forth. The art of which she thinks is imitative and derivative. As one reads the catalogue of mythical authors, painters, books, and pictures in her fiction, one is impressed by their ghastly unreality. They are only as real as their conditions would permit them to be—as real as the acres of Americana on the walls of our galleries and art institutes, or the forgotten books of ten or twenty years ago. It is fair to say that Mrs. Wharton uses these things chiefly as counters in her game, the object of which is a symmetrical pattern of life, or the Q. E. D. of a moral theorem. It is significant, however, that in the most humanly real of her accounts of the artistic conscience, *The Recovery*, Keniston abandons the colonial experiments of his first, second, third and fourth periods for the Louvre.

It is to be said, however, that Mrs. Wharton never makes expatriation an end in itself. That problem of the colonial novelist, to which

Henry James returned again and again, appears only incidentally in her stories; and in them she shows no sympathy with the feeling that the good life is to be found only in Europe. Henry James, indeed, considered her case carefully. His first acquaintance with her work, in 1902, called out the exclamation: "She must be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a back-yard in New York." (Letters of Henry James, Vol. I, page 396). Later, in 1906, he advised her not to "go in too much for the French or the Franco-American subject—the real field of your extension is here [England]—it has far more fusibility with our native and primary material." Later still, apropos of *The Reef*, he reverted to the subject in terms which exactly define Mrs. Wharton's difference from Jane Austen or George Eliot: "Your only drawback is not having the homeliness and inevitability and the happy limitation and the affluent poverty of a Country of your Own, (comme moi par exemple.)" (Letters, II, 286). Mrs. Wharton, however, refused to become an English novelist. In spite of her long residence abroad she has remained in matter and point of view an American. Unlike Henry James she is a part of American literature. With whatever re-

sentment at the inadequacy of our appreciation she is still one of us.

To compensate for the softness of the material upon which she sought to stamp her impression of life, and to enhance the vividness of that impression, Mrs. Wharton brings certain unimpeachable literary gifts and attainments. Her style is a clear, luminous medium in which things are seen in precise and striking outline. If the figures are pale in coloring they have definiteness of line. She never fell victim to the self-conscious mannerisms of Meredith and James. Her early addiction to epigram became more and more restrained, and the marks of imitation and erudition vanished as her style became more and more her own. For the highest praise of her achievement in this process we must go to her master.

"There used to be," wrote Henry James in 1912, "little notes in you that were like fine benevolent finger marks of the good George Eliot—the echo of much reading of that excellent woman, here and there, that is, showing through. But now you are like a lost and recovered 'ancient' whom *she* might have got a reading of (especially were he a Greek) and of whom in her texture some weaker reflection were to show. For, dearest Edith, you are stronger and firmer and finer than all of them put together; you go farther and you say *mieux*."

Mrs. Wharton doubtless smiles at this effervescence, for humor remains one of her steadfast qualities. It shows itself broadly as caricature of the Philistines of Apex City, or more subtly as satire of those within the pale. Even in the great emotional crisis of the war she could see the absurd pretensions of her country-women of both sexes, expending themselves in activities which merely enriched their self-importance. In her irony, she realizes George Meredith's definition of comedy as "the humour of the mind"; and her happiest attitude is that of his comic spirit, with "the sage's brows," and "the sunny malice of a faun," who at the vices and follies of mankind, looks "humanely malign," and casts "an oblique light on them followed by volleys of silvery laughter."

Mrs. Wharton can stand outside of her world to criticize—not to create. She lacks the power of imagination to follow the leadings of her experience and the phenomena of her environment into other fields, to transpose the themes of her chamber music into larger harmonies and discords of the full orchestra. And the age upon which Mrs. Wharton has been cast has become increasingly impatient of art in its refinements as a

criticism of life, or for any purpose except large representation and bold decoration. After the brief interlude of civilization in the nineteenth century the world has reverted toward barbarism. The battle for survival is seen to be more than ever the cardinal fact in human biology, and the intensity of the impression of life in fiction has come to depend more and more on the agony of the struggle portrayed, the variety of its exigencies, the excitement of the calculation of the odds. The substitution of the theme to live well for the theme to live seemed to the last century a natural development in its art, but the unleashing of the cruder forces in the racial and industrial conflict has thrown the world back into a more primitive phase of the evolutionary struggle. All this has come to pass since Edith Wharton made her appearance in literature nearly thirty years ago. She cannot claim to have been born out of her due time, but it is among the happy consequences of her persistence in her original well-doing that she remains for us among the voices whispering the last enchantments of the Victorian age.

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 IV. The Spark (The 'sixties).



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